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SPOTLIGHT ON

Transportation San Mateo Co.

SamTrans

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN T. MAURO

SAN MATEO COUNTY TRANSIT DISTRICT

The SAN MATEO TRANSIT DISTRICT (SAMTRANS), established by a referendum in November, 1974, is the newest of the six major transit operators in the Bay Area. Although the nine-member Board of Directors is empowered to levy a 1/2¢ sales tax, the Board has not found it necessary to do so. In July, 1976, SAMTRANS consolidated eleven existing city bus systems with 62 buses, carrying about 14,000 passengers daily. Today, SAMTRANS has 145 buses, 325 employees, and is carrying about 30,000 passengers daily.

JOHN T. MAURO, SAMTRANS GENERAL MANAGER, is the former executive director of the Port Authority of Allegheny County in the Pittsburgh area. Under Mauro's leadership, ridership increased on P.A.T. by 22% to 108,000,000 passengers annually. A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, Mauro has been a reporter, a director of public relations, and director of planning for the City of Pittsburgh.

WHAT CHANGES DO YOU SEE AHEAD FOR SAMTRANS?

Beginning in June, there will be a dramatic change in service. For the first time, you will be able to get all the way down the Peninsula without a transfer. We have a three-year contract with Greyhound, and we set the schedule and fares. There will be improved service on El Camino Real and #101 and to the airport. Service will be 7 days a week, from 5 AM to midnight. Fares will be much lower. Now, Greyhound charges 60¢ for a few blocks ride. We will charge 25¢ plus 15¢ for each additional zone. We are hoping to have buses across the San Mateo/Hayward Bridge by July.

WHAT HAS BEEN SAMTRANS BIGGEST PROBLEM?

Getting equipment and building up a maintenance operation. We have small buses from eight different manufacturers using three kinds of fuel. Getting mechanics that can handle such a diverse fleet of buses has been a problem. Getting customers has not been a problem. We have 6 million passengers this fiscal year, and we expect 13 million next year.

HAS SAMTRANS HAD FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES?

We had a reserve that had built up for several years, and we have not spent it as rapidly as one might expect. We're getting four federal grants of about $7 million for buses. We will not need to levy the 1/2¢ sales tax in 1977-78, and I can say without equivocation, it will not be necessary in 1978-79. But 1980 is too far ahead to project.

WHAT HAS BEEN SAMTRANS' EXPERIENCE WITH LABOR?

The main difficulty was that we were going through a stage when we were not yet organized, and the question was--with whom do you negotiate? Once ATU held its election, we began negotiating in August and in December we had a three-year contract which I think is favorable to the District. We will not reach a $7 wage until mid-1979. Other operators are already paying $7.50 and MUNI is paying $8. The negotiations weren't easy, but we got through.

WHAT IS SAMTRANS DOING TO MAKE IT EASIER TO TRANSFER TO OTHER TRANSIT SYSTEMS?

We're in good shape with the SANTA CLARA TRANSIT DISTRICT. Its buses come to Menlo Park and we go down to Palo Alto. We have mutually acceptable transfers without extra charge. We are trying to work out a reduced fare with BART to the airport.

We've had a very difficult time with MUNI. In trying to work out the service with Greyhound, one of the key issues is where will our buses land in downtown San Francisco. We began a series of meetings with various municipal departments last October and thought we had an agreement and would start in January. Then the whole thing fell apart. It seems strange that only now

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the union has begun to ask qu[illegible]lons. The union says that if you stop on this street, you will be taking MUNI patrons. We assure them we will not--it's a closed door operation. We try to impress on them that it is as important to San Franciscans as to us on the Peninsula that we have this service. Now it looks a though the service won't start until June.

WHY DOES SAMTRANS HAVE ONLY ONE STOP ON THE MEDIAN STRIP AT THE AIRPORT?

We were lucky to get anything. They didn't even know we existed. There was one stop between the terminals not occupied. We barely got permission to put up a sign. We got good cooperation, but the airport is so congested. Our Greyhound buses will run more frequently to the airport than the San Bruno Flyer.

Another program we plan to initiate is to buy bulk SP tickets to be sold to SP commuters for a discount. There is an item in the budget for that program. We built our platform on two premises--first, building a good local and regional supporting bus service and second, to preserve SP service, even though SP doesn't want to be preserved.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE PRIMARY OBSTACLES TO A TRULY REGIONAL TRANSIT SYSTEM?

The Bay Area is all carved up into competing county Districts. It makes an enormous problem, but it's not all bad. On the one hand, it's difficult to visualize a regional system when there are so many independent districts, each determining the technology, the equipment and routes it will use. On the other hand, if the Bay Area were to move in the direction of one large metropolitan district like New York, we would all live to regret the day. The very size would jack-up labor costs, and give enormous power to the unions. And it would result in a growing bureaucracy and growing deficits.

I really don't know the answer.

WOULD A TRANSIT ASSOCIATION HELP?

AC Transit took the lead in calling a meeting of the six major operators, and we've been meeting monthly since December. There's a Board of Control consisting of the General Managers. Staff does the work on committees that are set up to look at purchasing, ma[illegible]enance, and so forth. It's a step toward coordination in handling problems of mutual interest. Earlier, we tried to set up a Joint Powers Agreement, but BART was suspicious and it collapsed. Herringer (General Manager of BART) is participating in these meetings, but I don't know if his Board has approved the concept yet.

WOULD THE "TRANSIT OPERATORS COORDINATING COUNCIL", PROPOSED IN SPEAKER MCCARTHY'S LEGISLATION (AB 1107), HELP IN CREATING A REGIONAL TRANSIT SYSTEM?

The problem is trying to formalize the association. Who's going to be in charge? MTC sought legislation that would have put them in charge. They've been asked to participate in the operators' group that is meeting now. It really doesn't make any difference how MTC participates--whether it's through a mandate or not. The strength in the association will be if any meaningful programs are carried out. No association can set a fare structure or negotiate common labor agreements for the independent systems.

MTC could do what's needed with or without a formally mandated association. MTC's power through grants and allocations is an extremely important power. MUNI now gets $184,000 from us to support its operations and that went through MTC grant approval process. If we don't get an agreement worked out with MUNI soon, I'm not going to look kindly on giving our money to MUNI next year.

IF YOU COULD CHOOSE ONE THING TO HAPPEN THAT WOULD AID TRANSIT, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Some form of funding that assures and perpetuates transit and enables it to expand. I'd do it with a gas tax increase. The key to the rail systems is for them to be taken over by the state--not taken over by buying the right-of-way and beginning a separate service--I would not buy that. But the state could get a service contract and manage the funding. If the railroad truly wants to stay in business, there are funds and ex-managers of rail service available to do the job. The public could not do it any better.

The key to the West Bay corridor rail service is the state. We could give the train cars a coat of paint--red and yellow--that would excite people. There's no need to put in a new rail system when we've already got one.